



## **Changing Role of People's Representatives in Populist Politics: Rural West Bengal Perspective**

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#### **Abstract**

*Populist politics changes the dimension of party politics in rural West Bengal. In any populist regime, the core values of politics are dominated by the popular manifestation of power, replacing earlier relationships between power and sanctity, process and priority, pattern and practices. The legitimacy of political power comes under threat as questions arise about the processes that generate power and the structures through which it operates. In this context, it is important to discuss the changing role of people's representatives in rural West Bengal.*

*This article examines the influential role of local political actors in advancing populist goals through rhythmic expressions of power. It also explores how certain relationship patterns contrast with these roles, misconstruing the political vocabulary of power. The article highlights the pattern of acceptability that sustains rule and the range of reliability that stabilises it. Local politics, shaped by cultural struggles, prepares the backdrop for the determinism of political power. Thus, redefining the relationship between power and leadership portfolios is crucial to managing the impacts of political changes.*

*A comparative analytical method, along with content analysis, has been adopted.*

*The key findings are:*

- (i) Local representatives' activities change when populist goals are accepted by core party members.*
- (ii) As long as populist goals do not contradict the ideological roles of major political parties in rural Bengal, they are accepted by local representatives.*
- (iii) The power of local leaders depends on the decentralised structure of their party, causing the influence of populist politics to vary from protest to appreciation.*

**Keywords:** People's representative, Populist power, Popular will, Changing role, Rural politics

#### **1. Introduction:**

People, power, and political parties form the core pillars of Indian democracy. Decisions taken within the democratic framework are dictated either by the people, by the authority of their collective will, or by those who represent them. Rules, responsibility, and representation constitute the focal points around which the goals of democracy are structured.

The dynamic execution of Indian democracy – the largest in the world – has gradually undergone transformation following the proliferation of populist regimes at both the

Centre and the States. Populist politics, by redefining the immediate goals of political regimes, challenges the established patterns of democratic governance, visions of power structures, roles and objectives of political leaders, the relationship between citizens and their representatives, and the overall direction of party politics.

These changes have deeply impacted the core values of democracy, reshaping them in accordance with the imperatives of populist rule. As a result, the focus of democracy has shifted from party-centric politics to a people-centric approach (Mair,2002); the authority of representatives is now defined in a pro-people manner. Long-term political visions have given way to short-term populist goals, while the rapid reconfiguration of power dynamics has sought to curb elitist manipulation in favour of vox populi – the ultimate source of democratic legitimacy.

In reorganising the power positions of both citizens and their representatives, these transformations have also disrupted the relational frameworks earlier constructed by political elites. Therefore, it becomes crucial to examine the evolving role of people's representatives under the populist regime: how they adapt to their diminished role as political strategists, how their public image transforms, and how they seek to maintain their credibility and reliability in the eyes of the electorate.

## **2. Purpose of the Study:**

In this article, an effort has been made to connect the changing role of people's representatives with the objectives of the populist regime in order to understand the true nature of rural politics in West Bengal. This article also aims to explore whether the changes in the role of people's representatives under the populist regime narrate a move towards direct democracy or cast a shadow of disillusionment.

Since Indian democracy lives in its villages, the main focus of this article is centred on rural areas, particularly rural West Bengal – a state that has experienced various forms of populist regimes since its inception. To map the intensity and range of populist will, which has changed over time, this article emphasises the role of people's representatives, as they mobilise such will towards new goals of political power.

A special effort has been made to compare the role of people's representatives as performed under the previous Left political regime with their current role under a non-Left regime.

## **3. Literature Review:**

The role of people's representatives in rural politics has multiple dimensions, shaped by diverse political factors that may vary from state to state, regime to regime, and power structure to power structure. Nevertheless, continuity in their role remains essential for the survival of local democracy.

Mapping the diverse range of political actions prescribed to representatives in rural areas, Manabi Majumdar observed that changes in party structures significantly shift the political strategies of populist leaders, affecting their relationships both with rural voters and with opposition parties (Ray,2020).

Focusing on the political stability, party action, and political discourse of West Bengal, Glyn Williams argued that the notion of Good Governance must be incorporated into the role of representatives, supported by a robust organizational structure (Williams,2001).

To sustain political stability and consolidate local leadership under populist conditions, Nelson Kasfir proposed a mixed constitutional model, suggesting that a blended version of

democracy would be more effective in shaping the role of people's representatives in the politics of various Third World countries (Kasfir,1992).

In the context of West Bengal, Sumit Hawladar pointed out that, instead of a consistent ideological framework, a hybrid ideological model proved more beneficial for the Trinamool government in maintaining the support base of its representatives within populist politics (Howladar,2014).

While these analyses focus on the ideological shifts within party structures, Sumanta Banerjee explored how the role of people's representatives is deeply influenced by electoral politics. He argued that representatives often modify their roles under electoral pressures and, in many cases, due to a lack of political education and consciousness, become instruments of their political masters, misusing their authority to serve organizational interests.

Banerjee further revealed that the populist attributes of electoral politics have altered the moral fabric of representatives, encouraging them to become pragmatic players in the realm of *realpolitik* (Banerjee,2016). Similarly, Myron Weiner insightfully noted that changing patterns of political leadership reset the objectives of political action, blending new elements with traditional structures to create flexible interactions that sustain convenient relationships between power and representation (Weiner, 1959).

While the reviewed literature offers innovative ideas and significant contributions to the theoretical framework of populist politics. It often falls short in addressing how the proposed structures and strategies might reshape the role of people's representatives in rural West Bengal. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to the nuanced interplay between the formal responsibilities and informal dispositions of those representatives within the realm of local politics. Consequently, the present study seeks to bridge the gap, as the objectives of the existing works do not fully correspond with those of the present author.

#### **4. Methodology:**

A comparative analytical method has been applied to investigate the matter as proposed in this study. For this purpose, three different units of comparison (three different eras of political regime) have been chosen. In the selection of the various units of comparison, focus has been given to how much such units contain populist elements and how reliable they are in describing the diverse role of people's representatives in local politics to address populist causes in a more effective way.

The scope of various units has also been taken into consideration in terms of their ability to connect with the different ranges of popular diversions and integrate them into a single frame so that the dimension and direction of the flow of power in populist politics under various regimes can be detected. It is also important for the present researcher to reveal how effectively the chosen units reflect the tuning pattern of governmental goals and the populist roles undertaken by the people's representatives to accommodate them into populist politics.

To encompass the different spectrums of power relations with their various dimensions, a pragmatic version of the role of people's representatives in populist politics can be revealed. In keeping parity with its objectives, this study restricted itself within the specific fields of political actions in which political interaction between different political parties and power groups constructed the roles and goals of people's representatives.

In this study, the content analysis method has also been taken into account for analysing the data collected from various secondary sources.

### **5. Analysis:**

The analytical part of the theoretical framework, as described in this article, consists of two different aspects (structural and procedural) following two general propositions, which are given below:

- (1) Popular attributes of rural politics change the dimension of the roles and goals of people's representatives in rural areas.
- (2) Intervention of populist leaders in setting up the preferences of local political organizations and influencing their performances accordingly, changes the core relationship between people and their representatives.

### **5.1 West Bengal's Experience:**

In this respect, it is important to mention that, as a part of a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic, West Bengal has a long uninterrupted experience of popular regimes pursued by different rulers. Though heterogeneous elements mixed up in different phases of different realms, the existing democratic rules that govern the will of the people undoubtedly expanded the scope of democracy; however, such expansion never became a threat to the existing democratic structure. For example, when national leaders of the Congress party, who had formed governments both at the Centre and in the state, announced the 'Garibi Hatao' agenda for the whole country and designed policies accordingly, this did not irk the ruling political elite of rural West Bengal, most of whom belonged to the propertied classes.

Similarly, when the Left Front government came into power in the 1970s and introduced a number of radical initiatives (land reform, the scheme of politically elected Panchayats, Patta distribution, placing people's representatives above bureaucrats, and so on) to change the pattern and process of democracy for the fulfilment of their populist goals, the existing political setup of rural politics did not break down due to the overpressure of popular participation.

In both cases, an internal balance always maintained structural and functional integrity despite various mismatches in terms of diverse political actions and thoughts. This is the distinct feature of West Bengal politics that it maintains till date.

Now, the question is, if an internal balance between various trends governs the political sphere in different realms of rural politics, what makes people's representatives change their role as a part of strategic game-playing under the influence of populist politics for sustaining power and position? Besides this, it is also important to know to what extent their new role fits with the present goals of the democratic regime.

In the case of West Bengal, most of the rural bodies are governed by the representatives of the ruling political party. In most cases, they act as agents of their mother political institution (Mitra & Bhattacharya, 2018) and pursue their roles accordingly. Whatever is politically decided at the state level is implemented by them to maintain a strong hold over rural political life.

With the emergence of populist politics, as a number of changes have been introduced in policy matters, the roles of people's representatives have begun to change gradually under its influence. A new set of preferences controls their choices and causes a shift in their roles to make them more connected with the popular goals of rural politics.

Secondly, to cope with the new institutional setup in rural areas, representatives of rural people often change the very dimension of their jobs. For example, when the newly elected Left Front government introduced large-scale structural and procedural reforms in favour of its populist goals, the elected representatives at the ground level in rural areas changed their previous role—mostly played against the exploitative state mechanism—and started playing a new role, most of which centred around the politicization of rural people along the lines of class politics, pertinent to the goals of their political party.

Thirdly, political changes in the existing domain of rural politics also bring changes in the role of people's representatives (Bhattacharya, 2023). Such changes, as they happen in favour of populist political parties, sometimes cause remarkable shifts in the existing pattern of political interaction between various power blocs dominating rural politics.

Fourthly, to grab popular attention, people's representatives in rural areas sometimes add more impetus to their communicative role to keep people more aware of the populist policies of their party. In this respect, they may shift their role from a formal to an informal dimension to become closer to common people (Bartha, Boda & Szikra, 2020) as they think it will help them achieve political mileage in the future.

Fifthly, in some cases, the nature of interaction between administrators and people's representatives also becomes an influential factor in fixing the dimension of the changing role of the people's representatives in rural politics. As long as the roles and goals of people's representatives match the bureaucratic work culture, the desired outcomes can be achieved. But when discontent arises between them in terms of power and interest, conflict and contradiction become the driving forces behind political action (Roy, 2020).

For example, if a member of the bureaucrats in charge of any local administrative body denies fulfilling any undue advantage claimed by a representative of the people for the benefit of his or her own self, party members, or political party, then he or she may have to pay some cost for such denial. In this case, cooperation—probably the most desired goal between people's representatives and local administrators—can turn into bitterness and negatively affect the roles of both the people's representatives and the bureaucrats.

Besides these, some other factors like political position within their own party organization, acceptability to party members, relationship with members of other political parties, range of work, political consciousness of local people, and their political influence in local politics also play a determinate role in changing the dimension of their job in local politics.

In this respect, it is important to reveal what sort of changes have been taking place in the role of people's representatives in rural politics and in which spheres of work such changes appear.

Keeping in mind the distinct features of West Bengal's political scenario, this article applies a comparative analytical model to compare the changing role of political representatives across three different regimes in rural West Bengal. Such a model not only provides a complete picture of these changes but also explores whether such changes may uplift their political role as agents of popular democracy or push them to the corner in such a way that they can never become key players of democratic rule.

### **5.1.1 Changing Role of People's Representatives During the Congress Period:**

Through the model of comparative analysis, one can clearly visualize that from the very beginning, when the Congress took charge of both the Indian nation and this state, a

centralized model of administration had been introduced (Mitra,2005) where there was hardly any importance given to local politics. It was Rajiv Gandhi who first attempted to revitalize the local self-government institutions (Palanithurai,2009) and therefore paid some attention to local-level politics. Though he was unable to break down the stalemate that occurred in Parliament regarding the passing of the 64<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment, at that time, whoever represented the rural people or dominated the rural power circle mainly came from the rural elite class. Their role in local politics was mainly attributed to their own interests unless and until they were replaced by members of the politically elected Panchayat.

### **5.1.2 Changing Role of People's Representatives in the Left Front Period:**

With the surge of Communist politics, the political scenario of West Bengal began to change rapidly. The new rulers aimed to politicize rural populations along the lines of class politics to secure future political gains. As a result, political representatives of rural people came into the spotlight; their importance grew steadily not only in rural politics but also in state politics, and their roles expanded accordingly.

The visible changes that occurred in the role of people's representatives in rural politics had two main dimensions: functional changes and procedural changes. Functional changes refer to short-term adjustments carried out within specific fields of work. Most tasks of a day-to-day nature fell under this category. For example, maintaining regular contact with the electorate, addressing their needs on a routine basis, organizing meetings in rural areas, educating people about their democratic rights and duties, and politically mobilizing them against various forms of socio-political adversity were among the most prominent functions.

Another type of change that occurred in the procedural ambit of state politics to facilitate the smooth conduction of rural political activities definitely had some positive impacts on the role of people's representatives in rural areas. To make them more responsible to the people and more accountable to their political parties, a number of changes were introduced (Lofgren, 2016). These not only altered the pattern of interaction between the people and their representatives but also broke down the concept of elitist politics of the previous regime by bringing common people to the heart of rural politics.

While the previous Congress rulers could not set any goal for the integration of rural people in accordance with their party line, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), along with its other partners, founded the plinth on the basis of class politics and mobilized the interests of the downtrodden to maintain political sanctity in ideological terms.

When the role of people's representatives changed ideologically, a number of attributes came into its purview. For example, unlike the previous rulers, the representatives of rural people from the Communist Party in West Bengal became ideological preachers to secure their political position in the minds of common people in rural West Bengal (Gupta,1989). Such a role changed their image from political leaders to ideological gurus and thus opened up a scope for them to control different aspects of the lives of common people. In this way, the politicization of rural people took place.

A number of laws and by-laws were also passed by the then State Legislative Assembly, in which procedural changes were defined at the governmental level. Nevertheless, such changes like the revitalization of local self-government institutions in the rural belt, curbing the power of the top bureaucrats (Dsagupta,2020) for the sake of giving more freedom to people's representatives, land reforms and related issues, developing the

Welfarist notion of the state, and building a more people-centric state apparatus also influenced the range of changes in setting up the procedural goals implied to justify the reasons for the populist endeavour that had been adopted to strengthen the basis of local democracy. On this occasion, the role of people's representatives changed its dimension from passive to active, from focal to vocal, from static to dynamic. To become more organized in respect of their procedural aspects, a good number of new setups were introduced at the local level political organization. Kisan Sabha, Mahila Samiti, were the most prominent among them.

In due course of time, such strategies became undulated with the forthcoming challenges arising from the free market economy, which duped the modern version of welfare statism and compelled the Marxist rulers to change their strategy for greater benefits. Like other leftist states, West Bengal was also in the row to change its strategic relationship with the people, which was no longer in fashion. Though such efforts could not produce the desired results, and within a few years of such changes, the Left Front was replaced by the Trinamool government.

### **5.1.3 Changing role of people's representatives in Trinomool Period**

Under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee, the Trinamool Congress came to power in 2011. Under the banner of 'Poribartan', a large number of policies and schemes were declared, most of which were populist in nature. Though a stark difference in role and goals was cited compared to the previous rulers, the populist choices made did not significantly differentiate the two (Communist and non-Communist governments). Despite a meaningful shift from government to governance, the role of people's representatives in the local politics of rural West Bengal could not become prominent, as in most cases they had to follow the popular verdict alongside their party rules. In the absence of a centralized party system and organized party structure, internal feuds emerged; disunity and differentiation among party members narrated the story of poor coordination within the party structure, which sometimes misguided their role and deviated them from their mission.

To cope with the demands of populist politics at the local level, representatives of the rural populace in West Bengal expanded their role, keeping a close watch on such matters to prevent further intensification of incongruence within the structural ambit of party politics. It was also their duty to check the imbalances within the internal party structure at the local level so that their impact upon voters would not lead to a serious legitimacy crisis. Trinamool, in its rise as the leading political party of rural West Bengal, has sought to frame its goals in a manner that reflects the core objectives of populist values under a democratic political regime. With the announcement of these new goals, it was expected that locally elected party members would shift their role from that of leaders to co-workers—companions of the common people—joining hands with voters to safeguard the ideals of true democracy. To maintain close connections with the local populace, a number of programmes were adopted. Organizing village fairs, football and cricket tournaments, blood donation camps, and the observance of Rakhi Purnima, Rabindra Jayanti, Independence Day, and many other auspicious events have been particularly notable in this regard. Such programmes not only demonstrate the skill of popular management in a legitimized manner but also open channels for resource mobilization essential for the survival of the political community.

Unity among rural people across diverse political situations under the leadership of local representatives has further enhanced their popularity among the masses. In addition, most people's representatives in rural West Bengal have involved themselves in the planning and implementation of various welfare schemes, which has necessarily brought them closer to the rural electorate. It is not that the previous Leftist rulers failed to connect with their constituents or lacked sufficient schemes to meet public demands. The crucial difference lies in the fact that during the Leftist political regime, representatives of populist politics at the rural level operated within the framework of class politics – an approach that has been categorically rejected by the local representatives of the current ruling party (Bhattacharya, 2023). Consequently, the scope of political activities among rural representatives has expanded to such an extent that the gap between demand and outcome continues to widen; increasing expectations from popular representatives under the current political regime have necessitated multiple roles for them, stretching the goals of populist politics from the definite to the infinite.

In recent years, a new trend has emerged in the populist politics of rural West Bengal: the role of local representatives as a connective link between the grassroots and the core political leadership has diminished significantly. Channels of communication have increasingly come under the direct control of the Trinamool supremo or her handpicked representatives from the party's core organization (Shome, Neyazi & Ng, 2024). Patterns of communication have also changed rapidly. In addition to face-to-face interactions, a new set of communicative tools and platforms has been developed. *Didi Ke Bolo* stands out as the most prominent initiative offering a dedicated phone line through which ordinary citizens can communicate directly with the Trinamool supremo. Similarly, email, Twitter, and other modern communication technologies have been employed for this purpose (Biswas, 2024).

The importance of people's representatives has also declined, as most of the Welfarist programmes or schemes have been placed directly under the supervision of local bureaucrats (Ray, 2000). In this context, people have become more closely connected with the local administrators or their associates rather than with the political representatives of the leading political party. Local bureaucrats, being more connected with their political authority, sometimes take the upper hand over the people's representatives. In the absence of the required skills, local representatives cannot compete with members of the bureaucracy and, therefore, in most cases, become mere puppets in the hands of bureaucratic agencies.

Unlike the Marxists, representatives of the present local democracy could not appear as preachers of political ideology, nor could they establish themselves as ideologues in the eyes of the rural people whom they represent. What they have adopted in drawing rural people within the ambit of their political power are money, muscle, and menace. A few political theorists equate this with the fanatic outcome of lumpen political culture (Banerjee, 2016, Roy, 2016).

Rural politics becomes corrupted. In most cases, rural politics becomes subjected to political subversion, disruption, dissociation, domination, and dislocation; nepotism becomes a common practice in the filthy atmosphere of rural politics. Short-term objectives and popular goals dominate the power circles of rural politics. In most cases, all political power in rural politics has been vested in the hands of individuals who are poorly educated, have little knowledge about their duties, and are not properly aware of their



roles. This poses a serious threat to the democratic politics of rural Bengal.

Though, in an attempt to cleanse their political image, the supremo of the ruling political party tries to clip the wings of corrupted political representatives (Roy,2016), she loses this battle in a broader aspect. Allegations of corruption in government services against a large number of heavyweight leaders of the ruling political party might be strong proof to justify this point. However, it is also true that the acceptance of meritocracy in local politics may cause a real crisis for the existence of democratic rule, though skill, education, and commitment should ideally be the basic criteria for any post designed for rural politics in a democratic society.

#### **6.Compare of the roles of people's representatives in different political regime**

The interlinkage between power, position, and politics determines the role and goal of people's representatives in various political regimes. However, what makes it delicate are the various socio-economic factors that constitute individual identity and connect it with different arrays of power, position, and politics to define the authority of a single individual. In different power regimes, such factors change their prior position and nature, sometimes replacing each other, thereby reassembling the texture and structure on the basis of which one can assess how power, position, and politics are connected, and to what extent such connections influence the role of political authority.

In West Bengal's experience, it is widely known that people's representatives who actively participate in rural politics assume a central role in the power structure of the rural political regime. Though it is not indicated that such a role is purely an outcome of their political interaction, it takes shape through the interplay between power, authority, and legitimacy. Power is decided by one's own identity, mostly explained in terms of the socio-political and economic position a person achieves within a particular time and society. When such an identical position is accepted by a large number of people living in the same society, it constitutes legitimacy; the exercise of legitimate power constitutes authority. Thus, whoever becomes a people's representative should possess the authority to exercise the power of the political regime.

Now, the question arises: how much is the authoritative role of a people's representative in the rural community influenced by his socio-economic position? If politics is a means of exercising legitimate power, how is such power linked with the socio-economic position of an individual, and does such power determine one's position in power politics, or vice versa?

Considering all these factors a comparison between the role of people's representative in the three different political regimes of West Bengal is given below-

**Table-1**

**Comparative account of the role of people's representative in various regime of West Bengal**

Parameter of mapping the role	Role of people's representatives in the era of Congress	Role of people's representatives in the era of Left Front	Role of People's representatives in the era of Trinamool
Power	Unleashed and unchallenged, mostly centralized in nature	Organized power specified by law with decentralized attributes	Unorganized, though specific by law but judgemental in nature mostly controlled by the leaders of the upper stratum of the party organisation.
Autonomy	Limited autonomy	Greater autonomy in its respective field	Partial autonomous in nature
Legitimacy	Limited in the sense that only a small group of people spread their hand to support this system	Widen, as the support base of people's representatives became broader with the introduction of political participation through popular election in rural bodies.	Widen as broad-based support system has been accelerated by addressing multiple interests of different groups and connect between them.
Structural relationship	Weak, partial and dimensionless	Strong, mostly impartial and multi-dimensional	Weak, semi-partial with changing dimension
Procedural obligation	To some extent present as in most cases it is undermined by rural elites	Present profoundly	Partially present
Interaction with common People	Not frequently and spontaneously	Frequently and spontaneously	Need based frequent interaction with flexible communication in a spontaneous way
Mutual dependency of party leaders	Hardly achieved	Achieved to a large extent	Partially achieved
Influenced by different social and economic factors	In a large scale, as much as possible for stable their rule.	To that extent permitted by their party rules.	In a large scale specially when such forces make them enable to use their political skill in developing support base for their rule.

From the above table, it is quite clear that the role of people's representatives in different phases of political regimes in rural Bengal has some common parlance, but the axioms of these roles, sometimes independent in nature and interdependent in feature, are sustained with a goal to achieve greater accessibility and quality in different fields of political action. The table shows that in various regimes, representatives of the people in rural politics set their roles in various ways by prioritizing different factors, either consciously or unconsciously, to achieve political gain. However, the results in terms of their achievements are not the same. Power produces greater autonomy when it is exercised in an organized way, as happened during the Left Front period, but when unleashed power freezes into a centralized structure, exercised in an unorganized way, the desired autonomy is not achieved by the people's representatives in rural politics, as was largely experienced during the Congress period. In the Trinamool period, though the power of people's representatives in rural politics is specifically defined by party rules, it is not exercised in an organized way, and therefore produces a lower scale of autonomy.

Similarly, autonomy has a direct relationship with legitimacy. From the above comparison, it can be said that the more autonomy is provided to local representatives in rural politics, the more legitimacy is produced.

Autonomy and legitimacy also define power, which is responsible for determining the structural relationship within party organizations and other representative structures. If anyone who represents people in rural politics becomes popular among villagers because of his or her own charismatic nature, he or she definitely has some influence in deciding the structural relationship both within the party organization as well as in representative bodies. The party tries to make use of his or her crowd-puller image for better electoral results in the future, and therefore provides greater autonomy to him or her in deciding the structural relationship within the party organization. Such autonomous power helps the representative of rural people to maintain his or her popularity by subscribing to the popular will and respecting the verdict of the people, thereby achieving greater legitimacy in representative organizations by redefining structural goals in a more rational way and setting relational objectives accordingly.

From the above table, it is clearly reflected that where autonomy is limited, legitimacy becomes spurious and provides a weak structural relationship between intra-party members as well as other representative bodies in rural politics. Sometimes, a lack of legitimacy causes fault lines within the party structure and produces risks for party members who represent the people of rural areas. To resist such trends, some obligations have been imposed upon the representatives of the people that bind them to their political goals and compel them to respect the moral obligations prescribed by their party constitution. It is evident from the said table that whenever power becomes all-pervasive in nature, such obligations either become obsolete, as happened during the Congress period, or press representatives of rural politics to submit their power to the supreme authority to maintain the status quo in rural politics – a common feature in the present Trinamool era. Greater autonomy can produce better results in maintaining procedural obligations prescribed by the party, as experienced largely in the Left Front era. It facilitated the way through which one, being a member of the Communist party, could achieve more legitimacy within the party line.

Interaction with voters is another important factor in producing legitimacy in favour of local people's representatives in rural areas. The above table shows that interaction with

people grows high when the representatives of rural people become free from the control of all centralized power of their party organization and exercise autonomous power to settle subsequent matters like the decentralization of power, relational goals, organized structure, through which the outcome of the interaction is narrated and channelized in accordance with their political goals, rational applicability, structural orientation, and so on. In every regime, rulers, according to their needs, use these subsequent factors either in a constructive way or destroy their significance in producing more restriction upon people and their representatives. Therefore, it is not wrong to say that such additional factors are highly phenomenal and, in some cases, few of these become dormant and do not respond to the progressive needs of popular interaction, as happened in the Congress era and partially in the present Trinamool regime. Though the Left Front regime represented an optimistic view in picturizing these variables, in the limited sphere of rural politics it was not easy for them to prescribe the way through which all these subsequent factors could work efficiently towards the goals of their political regime. In this case, whatever was introduced by the local representatives in rural politics for effective interaction with the people did not provide the ground for coordination between all these factors and therefore offered only a limited channel of interaction with their electorate.

Mutual dependency can hardly be achieved in a centralized structure where trust and mutuality could not work. In the Congress period, because of the centralized power structure along with undefined power relations in rural politics, mutual dependency among party leaders could not be achieved. Autonomy to local political leaders, along with a democratic power structure, may facilitate mutual cooperation amongst party leaders, as happened in the Left Front regime, thereby uniting them into a single structure of party rule, though it never curbed the autonomy of people's representatives. In the present regime, the leaders of the Trinamool government, because of their continuous changes in political strategies as well as in their political stand, lost their credibility in the minds of local party leaders. Not only so, from the very beginning, those who assisted the Trinamool party to strike their roots in the soil of West Bengal, one of the renowned Left Front bastions in India, after winning the electoral battle in this state, most of them were pushed to the side-lines by the Trinamool supremo. In such a situation, there is hardly any scope for mutual dependency among party leaders.

Various socio-economic factors like caste, class, religion, gender, and language, along with different economic factors, have been used in various regimes by different political rulers to produce legitimacy in their favour. But the tools that have been used to achieve this goal are not the same in different regimes. For example, when Congress was in power, the so-called representatives of rural people used these factors (not all) so calculatedly that they could fully utilize the appeal of those factors in a sensitive way. In this connection, they created various channels which politicized the appeal of these non-political factors in such a way that political legitimacy could be achieved. In this way, the extra-political loyalty was exploited by the leaders of rural politics in the Congress regime to strengthen their support base. It definitely opened up the scope for Congress leaders to justify the symbiotic relationship they established between political structures and extra-political factors in rural areas.

Being an advent of modern political institutions, the Left Front discarded ancient political institutions and the way through which such traditional institutions begged loyalty. In their hands, class became the determinate force of rural politics. With the help of

more popular means like the introduction of political panchayat and the inclusion of the excluded in rural politics, it expanded its support base and set the cornerstone of a new type of legitimacy.

The present rulers have also used these factors to fulfil the needs of the populist regime. Various attributes of these factors have been purposively mixed up to transform the diverse range of political values so that authoritative allocation of values would be justified properly. In this way present political rulers ensure the protection of their political stability. A number of festivals, Melas, and Khelas easily expand the scope for people's representatives to explore the connecting links between various dominating values and political actions. Such initiatives bring them closer to their electorate in rural politics. These activities define the relational aspects between the people and their representatives in popular terms, thereby maintaining the status quo in the political power structure of rural politics (V. Bijukumar, 2004).

### **7. Impact of these changes on the rural politics**

Changes in the role of people's representatives, as occurred under the pressure of populist politics in various phases of the political regime of rural West Bengal, not only influenced the scope and objectives of rural politics but also changed the rules of the political environment on which it revolves. To assess the extent to which such changes influenced the nature and scope of rural politics, a keen observation has been made of the different phases under which such politics operated under the banner of either right-wing or left-wing political parties. The shift in political power, as happened in rural West Bengal immediately after independence, could not be much helpful in defending the democratic structure, as all the controlling power of rural politics had been vested in the hands of the propertied class (Bardan et.al, 2009) who joined hands with Congress leaders to build a dominant power bloc to perpetuate their control over political society. People had no voice in deciding their lives. A centralized structure of political power set the rules of the relationship between rulers and the ruled. In such a case, the polarization of different political powers never culminated in the existing political society. In this context, various social factors like caste, class, religion, region, and so on began to rule the decision-making authority. The overlapping of various political and non-political elements in the framework of political power decided the basic pattern of the power game. Common people were excluded from the ambit of political power, though politics was directed in the name of the people, by the people, and for the people.

The situation changed after the surge of leftist politics in rural West Bengal. Leaders of leftist parties tried to change the existing political situation in rural politics through the mobilization of rural people solely on the basis of class lines (Basu & Majumdar, 2013). Therefore, the polarization of rural politics happened in their hands. As they opened up the scope for common people to participate in the political affairs of rural areas, the need to set up a large number of new political organizations came to their mind. It was also necessary to beat the power blocs of the dominant rural class and establish an alternative model of rural politics. In this way, a large number of political organizations entered the sphere of rural politics and provided a platform for common people to become more active in rural affairs; therefore, changes in the power equation occurred in rural areas.

There is no doubt that rural politics became more vibrant in the hands of the populist leaders of the leftist regime. Probably, they were the first to educate rural people about their roles and goals and brought them to the centre of the power structure in the political

society of rural West Bengal. With their rigorous efforts, civil society—which had almost become obsolete from the rural scene—was revived (Roy & Banerjee, 2006). It helped people protect their power and rights as citizens from the unusual interruption of state power and other dominant structures. With the revitalization of civil society, the leftists created an alternative platform for common rural people to gain prevalence over the existing power structure.

Despite its various contributions, the limitations of class-based politics badly affected the spontaneous growth of political power in rural politics. It was unable to accommodate the diverse range of political action, attention, and attribution that were not included in the realm of class-based politics, and therefore could not provide the full picture of the political scenario in rural Bengal. Such inability to understand the real goals of the political regime misguided rural politics; from this gap, opportunist political parties raised their heads.

In 2011, after the defeat of the Leftist parties in state politics, the political power of rural areas gradually slipped from the hands of the previous rulers. As the newly elected rulers tried to shift the pattern of rural politics under the guidance of populist principles and demonstrated their rule accordingly, the previous role of people's representatives began to change rapidly. The impacts of such changes in rural politics were dimensioned in such a way that they could touch different aspects of the political regime.

The change in the role of people's representatives—from political leaders to concomitants of rural people—developed a pro-people structure of rural politics that helped people strengthen their position irrespective of their class, caste, region, religion, gender, language, and so on. Therefore, political activities that were previously conducted by the representatives of the ruling party in rural areas changed their dimension and brought the maximum number of people within their ambit (Bhattacharya, 2004). Though the core political area is still dominated by a small group of people, mainly members of the ruling party, the populist goals of the present rulers never encourage them to suppress the voice of common people. Therefore, the role of people's representatives in rural areas has been reduced to that of a mere caretaker, who takes care of people's voices in various planning and implementation processes.

After the end of the Left Front regime, a different set of political goals was fixed within the rural political ambit, through which class-based politics was safely transformed into developmental politics (Mahmood and Bhattacharya, 2016). In this new setup of local politics, the effectiveness of political activities can be measured by the parameters of developmental goals. The number of developmental activities narrates the success story of politics.

Strategic changes also revealed a new story in rural politics. Reducing the power of local representatives in political matters strengthened the trend of power centralization in rural areas (Nath, 2018). In deciding various matters—such as who will lead rural politics, the forms of party structure, the roles of political activities in rural areas, the scope of people's representatives, the types of Welfarist schemes, modes of communication, relationships with bureaucrats, and empowerment strategies for women and other backward people—everything is decided from above. Therefore, the dimension and direction of village politics are fully controlled by the core organization of the ruling party. In this way, it begins to lose its political autonomy.

As the ruling political party of this state largely depends on its bureaucratic structure, in rural areas bureaucrats gain precedence over people's representatives, as all powers concerning developmental activities are vested in their hands (Ray,2020). The lack of a mechanism to separate administration from politics sometimes costs heavily in terms of the autonomy of rural politics. Bureaucrats are often used as tools of political control in the hands of the present rulers. They sometimes act as a medium of communication between rural people and the core members of the ruling party. In this way, they not only replace the people's representatives but also add more centralized features to rural politics, while deactivating all channels of local democracy.

Changing communication skills and techniques also have some impact on local politics, both in qualitative and quantitative ways. More face-to-face communication with people legitimizes political affairs (Das & Nielsen, 2024) while the use of social media and other connecting links helps rulers to shape rural politics in their own way. It also makes rural people more aware of the pros and cons of politics and helps them to decide their role accordingly.

Last but not least, the role of people's representatives in rural politics has gradually changed under the influence of interest groups (Mitra,2021). Most of these group members are either rich businessmen, contractors from the upper middle class, or socially influential individuals, and are therefore categorically different from those of the previous era. In this context, the previously dominant power block has been replaced by a new one. Under the influence of this new power block, politics in rural areas tends to become bifurcated from its declared goals, hence creating problems in the political life of rural people. Illegitimate appropriation of power, misuse of resources, suppression of people's voices, deprivation from their due advantages, corruption, and bribery pervade everywhere. In this context, hardly any space has been left for democratic conversion in the rural political sphere.

Stability of rural politics is threatened when the components of this power block change their position, lose their relevancy, or the whole power block is reconstructed with new members. The power equation of rural politics, as it begins to change with the reconstruction of the power structure, might be pro-people in nature but creates a crisis in the pattern of legitimacy. In most cases, the dubious position of the ruler encourages people to question the authenticity of their leadership and the credibility of the political structure as a whole.

## **8. Conclusion:**

In populist politics, popular attributes of power re-dimension the political affinity of common people, deconstructing the systemic affiliation of the power structure with a single question – what constitutes the voice of common people in a democratic regime? It also questions the existing pattern of the value system, which interchangeably uses various normative propositions to justify that the acceptability of the general will, as in common sense, largely depends upon the activities of people's representatives, especially on how they differentiate between the general will and the will of all in the present context. Though, in reality, representatives of common people hardly narrate their voice, as in most cases they are guided by the principles of the market economy. It seriously undermines the democratic voice of common people, and the principles of democratic values are also

enthralled by market superstition. This leads to a crisis of governability. To cope with the demands of the changing situation, limitations are imposed on the role of people's representatives, and several other options have been introduced to place people at the centre of the democratic decision-making process. Most of these instruments are the products of an open market economy and make people more familiar with the market mechanism; with the use of these devices, people acquire knowledge about the processes of bargaining, price mechanisms, competition, advertising, and information sharing, and seek to make use of these in the premises of the political decision-making process. In this respect the activities of local representatives change as far as the principal goals of populist politics are accepted by the core members of their political party. As long as populist political goals do not contradict the social roles of ideological politics in rural Bengal, they are accepted by the people's representatives of local politics. The power of local leaders depends on the decentralised pattern of the party structure. Since there is a vast difference between the patterns of decentralisation in various structural compositions of party organisations, the influence of populist politics on the activities of people's representatives varies considerably – from power to protest, from action to reaction, from condemnation to appreciation. As long as populist politics accelerates the marketing of popular demands by instilling the basic principles of moral populism and reshaping institutional roles accordingly, the people's representatives of rural bodies cannot escape its influence.

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